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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the difficulties that rural students on a Maine island encounter as they make the transition from a small local elementary school to a large distant high school. The elementary school is characterized by small class sizes, close nurturing teacher-student relationships, and the involvement of parents and families. When students from this school enter the island's consolidated high school, they experience much larger classes, less supportive teachers, impersonal teaching styles, less parental support, lack of guidance from overworked school counselors, and derogatory comments about their origins in an isolated working-class village. The long distances between home and school and the lack of transportation interfere with access to additional academic help, participation in extracurricular activities, and parental involvement. Numerous interview excerpts illustrate student reactions to their high school experiences. Responses to the National Center for Student Aspirations (NCSA) survey indicate that, compared to ninth-graders who had left the small elementary school the previous year, current eighth-grade students in the school showed more commitment to achievement, greater enjoyment of their daily lives, and higher levels of inspiration and ambition. In terms of NCSA criteria, the elementary school does a better job than the high school in providing a setting in which students can develop high aspirations. (SV)

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'There's Many a Slip Between the Cup and the Lip'

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'There's Many a Slip Between the Cup and the Lip'

INTRODUCTION

Please note: This material comes from my dissertation: Working Memory, The Influence of Culture on Aspirations. This manuscript is not ready for publication and should not be cited without permission. Thank you.

Three Mountains Consolidated Grammar School nestles against the ebb and flow of Pogie Harbor Marsh, an estuary that embraces the school in a beautiful and serene setting on a large island off the coast of Maine.¹ The school, opened in 1951, is a one-story building with none of the grace of a traditional Cape and few of the amenities of "modern" education. The school now serves over 180 students and must rent "temporary" facilities to accommodate them. The gym, smaller than regulation, was built in 1974 as part of the Community Center and enlarged in 1984 to house the Town Offices. In this room, students practice musical instruments and eat lunch - which, though it may interrupt the town's clerks, does have the advantage of integrating children into the lives of adults when they come to get their dog licenses, fill out requests for septic permits, or pay their taxes.

The school is Spartan - no Science Lab, a small library, a tiny teachers' "lounge," and classrooms that, though they seem spacious and bright, are not large enough for the growing population of children. Some young families can

¹ Almost one-half of the Island, which encompasses about 110 square miles, is owned and protected by the national park system. The year-round population is slightly over 12,500 residents, however visitors and summer residents number between 2,500,000 and 3,000,000 annually.

still afford to buy property in Three Mountains, even though the rest of the island is too expensive. Also, Three Mountains is subject to the same demographic pressures as many other parts of the country and has experienced a similar rise in the number of school age children.

The strength of the school is in its people. The Principal, Cal Parker, has been at the school for over twenty-five years, and his father and mother were also teachers in the town. Five other teachers have each been there for over twenty years, and seven of fifteen full-time teachers grew up in the town or on the island. The average length of service at the school for all the teachers is 10.93 years. These are people who know each other and the families they serve. For example, because some families are reluctant to come to the school, unimposing as it is, Val walks around the docks and "hangs out" waiting for people to come up to talk about weather and the price of lobster until they edge up on the real reasons they, and he, are there: to talk about their children.

Listening to Cal and the other teachers talk about their students is extraordinary - like looking simultaneously through a microscope and a telescope. They see each child in minute detail and they see back through generations to where the child comes from. If these were not remarkably supportive, caring people, such complete knowledge might be oppressive, but I have seen no evidence of that. Instead, children are buoyed by the expectations and compassion of teachers and administrators who can be tough

and demanding because they believe these children can do well if they work hard, though they also know the realities that face them.

Transition to the High School

For many students, particularly those from supportive families, who are involved in extra-curricular activities or know they are going on to college, Island Regional High School offers a great deal. For example, a college student states, "for people like me who are ready, who know they are going to college, know what they have to do, the High School works very well, at least it did for me. I had some great teachers, like Dr. D., she was amazing."

However, transition to the consolidated High School (enrollment 1996-97 of 571) is difficult for some students from Three Mountains Grammar School who have a hard time adjusting and being successful. As they move from a class that is very small, often between eight and twelve students at Three Mountains School, to a class of well over one hundred, they confront problems in the larger school that are in many ways not surprising or extraordinary. For students accustomed to the nurturing of Three Mountains School dealing with these problems can become very difficult. If Three Mountains students lack strong parental support because, for example, their parents also feel uncomfortable in the larger school, problems they encounter are amplified. It

almost seems as if these students have not toughened sufficiently and lose their direction without continuing support.²

A current student talks about going to the High School from Three Mountains School:

It was so hard coming from Three Mountains - we had thirteen kids, we were a small class and very close class. The first day of high school a bunch of us girls were walking around going "you know who that is?" "No, do you?" You go from one hundred fifty kids in your school to one hundred fifty kids in your class. And these kids have more money. Big Harbor had about fifty kids in that class, so they all knew each other, they all knew someone. It was very hard going into that, specially you know people like "where are you from?" and "Three Mountains. Oh" - and it is like "What did I do?" I am from Three Mountains. I am proud I went to Three Mountains. I liked it, I wish I was back there....I would rather be from here not Big Harbor, where it is so big and you don't know everyone. I like knowing everyone, going down the road waving to people. I wave to everybody - and they wave back.

Moving to a larger school where they are not known is very difficult for some Three Mountains students.

The different teaching style at the high school may also alienate students. An experienced school administrator tells us:

Sit in on High School classes and you get the picture fast, because teaching the majority, maybe not the majority but there are enough teachers at the secondary level who are just dishing it out to the kids. I think Mr. X does a good job with kids...but you have an awful lot [for whom] the subject matter is all they see. They are just throwing the material out, throwing the assignments out, with not much concern as to the kind of effect.

² A finding that surprised, even shocked me, is that a disproportionate number of teenagers from Three Mountains suffer from depression in the high school.

A current student at the High School echoes this thought, "At Three Mountains, since it is such a small school the teachers can focus on students one at a time, but as there are so many kids here they have to take everyone at once, they can't stop what they are doing and help one person, they keep going."

A recent graduate, now studying at Tufts, adds: "In Three Mountains you know your teachers really well, you spend almost your entire year with them - English, Math. I spent three years with them; I know them really well. You develop a more personal relationship, whereas at the High School there will be a few teachers you get to know." Though this pattern typifies the teaching in many high schools, it is important to note the difference because it may not best serve all students from small rural communities.

A current student at the High School shows how size and distance from the High School make it difficult for students to get the help from teachers that they sometimes need:

It is just one big class of thirty people. If you are not caught up, you can stay after school, but if you live twenty-five minutes away from the High School, that is really hard if you are a freshman and you have to take the bus. Some teachers take it slow, others just go at their pace or don't go at all. I don't want to bad mouth them. I did not pass algebra because I could not keep up with the class.

A group of students agree:

Girl: I have Miss D. and she is a really great teacher and everything, but I am not getting the subject.

B: What happens when you don't get it ?

All: You don't get it.

B: Do you get help ?

Boy: It is hard to get help, the teacher has to be willing. I am not blaming the teacher: they have to give out, they have to put forth a major effort to give the students extra help because there are so many students to give student extra help.

Boy 2: 160, just Freshman.

Boy 3: It is hard. If you have to ask the page number of the assignment she will say "Didn't you hear? Go ask one of your classmates." She may not even remember.

Students are very forgiving of a system that makes it difficult for teachers to do a good job.

Teachers at the High School may suggest tutoring for Three Mountains students; however, for many this is not an option. Tutoring costs money and Three Mountains is located too far away from the High School for students to reach it easily, particularly younger students who cannot drive.

Girl: With Miss D., you have a test. You fail a test. What makes you think you are going to pass the next test ?

B: Am I understanding - you are failing?

Girl: That is what she told me.

B: And you aren't getting the kind of help you got in Three Mountains ?

Girl: Oh yes. This is what she told me, "OK that is nice, I don't know what you want to do about it," and I'm like saying - "I just don't get it."

Girl: I say, "Sorry, I don't get it" and she says "Sorry - you can get tutoring." I say, "No" [because my parents can't pay and I don't have transportation].

Some students who have done very good work at Three Mountains begin to drift by their Sophomore and Junior years, just when they need to focus on what they will do when they graduate from the high school. A former student says:

Actually I was headed more to English classes, writing classes, but my Sophomore year...I got in really bad, that and I had an awful, he was a good guy, but he was an awful teacher....If you were there and you wanted to do something, you did it but if you didn't he just let you sit there. I need to be pushed, so I slacked off and I kind of failed in math. I ended up transferring after my Sophomore year, I went up to Temple Christian....Yes, yes, you got pushed more at Three Mountains than in the High School.

And current students state:

[Three Mountains] was more structured, the classes were more rigid; if you didn't hand in your homework you got in trouble at Three Mountains; at the High School if you don't do it just knocks your grade off, you don't learn anything from it until the end of the year and by then it is too late. You don't get detentions, they just say or you didn't do it, mark it down and that does nothing for you as a student, trust me, you sit back and you say, "Oh I didn't do it, he didn't say anything," well you realize at the end of the year, wait a minute, and at Three Mountains definitely you did your work or you got in trouble.

Both these students said they now regret not preparing for college.

A young woman who attended Three Mountains School and graduated from the High School states:

I think the main thing with the teachers are that, you know, I coach up at the High School, and I kinda would see it the same way. If I see a kid who wanted to go further then I am going to spend more time on them; if I just see 'I am kinda of here, I am glad I got a uniform and leave me alone,' then that is what I am going to do. I

think in grammar school it may be a little bit different, if you can't get a kid interested in grammar school then they are not going to be interested in high school. I think that is a big difference with the teachers there [at Three Mountains]. They know that and they kind of are after you to do better. I think there is a lot of encouragement. Science wasn't my big thing, but Mr. Sawyer was saying, "You really got to study a bit harder," and I'd say "Oh all right." ...Then I did better, [got] a little bit of a kick.

For students used to the close attention of knowledgeable, caring teachers working with small classes, the less personal and more divided attention of teachers at the High School may not be enough to keep them focused on their work and away from distractions. However, students who have done well at Three Mountains School but lack parental support for post-secondary education, may begin to drift away from academic, college preparatory work in the large and relatively impersonal atmosphere of the High School.

Fear of being looked down on makes some students apprehensive about going to the high school. A current student at the High School notes, "We are backsideers because up until your Freshman year you can't drive, you saw nobody, we saw them at dances, but no one mixed - Three Mountains was on one side of the gym." A young father adds:

It was always 'the backside' when I went to school here....Truth is they are in Big Harbor...that is where all the tourists go, and of course our answer was, and I believe this, you can have it. It is quiet over here, as you well know, even in summer we don't have that much traffic going through Seal Cove and whatnot, and it is just great. But people do, even adults say it to people I been to school with, and we been out twenty years, and they say it, with a smile on their face though. You know where the kids get it from, they get it from the parents, it comes right on down through. I think

it bothered kids years ago more than it bothers kids now.

These interviewees are right, I think, that derogatory comments are less wounding than in the past. Nevertheless, recent graduates of Three Mountains School and Island High School have also experienced such prejudice.

A graduate of Three Mountains School and Island High School states:

I remember going from Pemetic to Three Mountains all the students said, "I can't believe you are going there." They looked down on it - Big Harbor and Northeast Harbor are more upper class, Big Harbor upper in business then South Harbor sort of getting to the fishing village but still a lot of boatyards, - and look at Three Mountains mostly as the fisherman, and you have more of the laborers at Three Mountains. I felt some of it was sort of like different class issues.

Some students don't feel they are taken seriously or given the same opportunities as other students from the towns on the Island. When I asked if there were "any way in which you have felt there was anything negative about the way you were treated?", one boy responded emphatically, "Hell, yes," and others added stories in agreement, suggesting they were discriminated against because they come from Three Mountains.

A current student and her mother noted:

Mother: Our sports program, you play ball, they got good coaches, but because it is Three Mountains, they [students] are the last ones looked at.

Daughter: Definitely.

Mother: ...unless they are super good ball players.

Mother: I can think of two in the last eight years but other than that you don't hear of any Three Mountains kids on the team.

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They also believe that Three Mountains students do not have equal access to academic programs and that the High School favors college bound students over those in the vocational and Business tracks.

B: Have you ever felt the High School cares more about the academic kids who are doing the college program ?

Daughter: Definitely

Mother: I think that is common.

Belief that Three Mountains students do not get on teams or into special programs, academic and otherwise, makes access even more difficult for them, access that is already hampered by lack of transportation, distance from the high school, and poor preparation due to the paucity of programs and facilities at Three Mountains. Though I cannot document the validity of these beliefs, the fact that so many people share them makes them deterrents to participation by students in some of the most beneficial programs offered at the high school.

Family support for Three Mountains students diminishes when they go to the high school, as it does for many secondary students across the nation. Students and teachers comment on this. For example, the music teacher at Three Mountains, whose husband teaches music at the high school says, "I've watched throughout the years as they get older in the concerts. The elementary school is full, the Jr. high not so full, in high school not nearly as many parents go. We need to have parents stay involved."

Mr. Green, an experienced educator in Maine and lifelong resident of Three Mountains notes one reason: "The high schools in general I think do not encourage parents as much as they should." Cal Parker suggests others:

When they moved to the high school, they [parents] did not continue that participation because of the competitiveness of the teams or because of the logistics of travel, because that has some bearing, the eleven or twelve miles to the High School or greater. I think they lose some of that connectedness to the school. They drift to the fringe, I think they do drift off to the fringe.

Others note that parents may not feel as comfortable at the high school as they have at Three Mountains School and may not feel they have much to contribute to their child's education at the higher level. A member of the first class to graduate from the consolidated High School reports that her parents never visited the school once during the entire four years that she was a student. A former Selectman reports, "Some parents say this, they tell me, that when their children go to the High School their job is finished, they don't feel so capable and don't feel needed." A mother adds:

I think that parents on the whole are a decent part of the kids lives, even at the High School. It is harder to be a part of their lives at the High School. It think it can be intimidating to the parents to, try to go over to the High School and get information, not that the people aren't open over there, any one of us can go over there, but it is more intimidating. Three Mountains is so small and you walk through the door and you are right there, you go to the High School and you've got to find out where you are going.

A recent graduate says: "Well - there is a big difference between like the parent-teacher communication and a big difference in what the parents are expecting of the kids anymore, cause they think they are getting older."

Students now at the High School say:

Girl 1: They [my parents] find it really hard to come here, specially going on to work - time wise, they don't have any time. They spend so much time running around they don't have enough time to enjoy.

Girl 2: It is hard because they want to come to the games, but between work and other stuff...it is so time-consuming.

Students who do receive parental support seem to treasure it, crediting their parents with their successes and talking about how important their families were to their decisions about what they would do after high school. They say their families taught them values and made them feel appreciated. A small group of young adults, just starting their own families, state:

Man 1: I think it still comes back to how you are raised with your family.

Woman: [his sister]: Parents, definitely all parents.

Man 2 [their cousin]: It all comes back to parents.

Parental support and encouragement offers students validation of their own worth and the importance of their work and activities at school. Students who receive this support are extremely grateful to their families and feel it was a critical ingredient in their successful completion of high school.

Parental support helps keep students involved in extra-curricular activities, which in turn seems to keep them involved with school and their academic work as well. Many people, including teachers, students and parents,

commented on the link between involvement with extra-curricular activities and academic work. They point out that parental involvement is critical in keeping a student interested in such activities and that involvement with extra-curricular programs such as sports, drama, and music, helps keep kids out of trouble.

B: I have heard from other people that ...some of the Three Mountains kids didn't have sports at the High School. Is there anything about that way the system is structured so those kids aren't pulled into something?

Brad: I would say family support would be a big thing.

Dwayne and Tad: Yeah.

Tad: There was a lot of kids didn't do sports but they did band, and they did just as well in band as we did in sports and they followed that up.

Tina: And drama.

Tad: And I think the High School has one of the best programs in drama, that was a big help for most of the other kids, lots of good music support.

B: How were you feeling support from your family for the things you did ?

Brad: They supported us in the things we did, which for us was sports, she did try the flute for awhile, I didn't really get into instruments. It was support for what we did and we choose sports. ...What we chose was sports and they supported us, they took us to Peewee Games and they would come to the games.

B: And the other parents, the kids who were drifting away ?

Brad: I don't think they had support at home.

Dwayne: Yeah.

Grandparents and other family members also commented on the importance of extra-curricular activities to students at the high school, though they did not link it directly to deteriorating academic performance. For example, a grandmother says, "Kids from Three Mountains now going to the high school don't participate as much in the activities like sports as they did in Three Mountains - like [my grandson], his grades are falling off." Young parents think about their own children.

The impact of involvement in extra-curricular activities seems to be enormous and circular. Improvement often means that students they proceed to the next level, which gives their parents more opportunity to support them and take pride in their achievements. Here a father shows what it means to him:

They do other things too, the kids here are in the music program, and the pageants they put on, you get to the High School, I used to love to watch [my daughter]. We went to Jesus Christ Superstar - I walked out and I was grinning from ear to ear. I was basically proud... You sit back and say "that's my daughter" and all of a sudden these people are all standing up cheering and whistling and hey that's my kid and it makes you feel pretty good.

Involvement in sports, drama, and music also takes time and dedication, which deters students from being drawn into drugs and other less positive activities. It also keeps them focused on their academic work because keeping their grades above a certain level is a prerequisite to participation in an extra-curricular activity.

Unfortunately, for many students at Three Mountains, particularly younger ones who depend on the school bus for transportation, becoming involved in extra-curricular activities is very difficult.

B: How many of you are involved in extra curricular stuff and how was it getting in?

All : Hard!

Girl: I am a cheerleader - it took me two years to get onto the squad, because we didn't have them [at Three Mountains]... it was hard coming in. We don't have anything. In Northeast Harbor their parents play tennis, but we don't have any of that. I made it my Freshman year, but I didn't get to play.

Boy: There is only a few going out for the basketball team, just a couple who tried, it was really hard for us to make it.

B: So a lot of the Three Mountains kids didn't try, is that what you are saying ?

Girl 2: To be on the team you have to show that you will do exceptionally well to compete with them.

Boy: When we were at Three Mountains we had no problem - good in soccer, good in basketball.

B: When you are younger, being in a little school you might get more opportunity to play and then you go to the bigger school you are more capable because you have had more experience, but there is also more competition and they have a full size gym and that sort of stuff ?

Boy: Yeah - and our gym is a lot smaller.

Girls and Boys: And Three Mountains is half hour from the High School. That is hard, specially for sports.

Girl 3: Three Mountains is a bad location because it is so far from everything, and there are not very many people.

Boy 3: Socially it is useless.

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Girl: Because not very many people from Three Mountains try out for things it is harder and harder to get rides home. You have to ask your parents really hard, and they have to come and it is really hard as it is so far away.

Boy: Things get done at eleven; we don't get home till twelve.

B: What about your parents, how do they feel about coming to the high school?

Girl 1: They get tired of always having to come - if, well, you get a ride home with someone else

Girl 2: But it is really hard to get a ride home.

The distance, the time it takes to get home, the unreliability of transportation, and the fact that few parents are easily available to pick up their children, all conspire to make it difficult for students from Three Mountains to participate in extra-curricular activities. When fewer students participate, it is even harder for others from Three Mountains to join because there is such a small group with whom to get a ride or to encourage their participation.

At the High School, students from Three Mountains encounter the more worldly lifestyle of students from other towns on the island and negative behaviors like involvement with drugs, cigarettes, and alcohol. One member of a group of high school students put it this way: "In Three Mountains school you are sheltered...you come here and you like, oh my God, I didn't know that !" Too many students from Three Mountains get pulled into this culture, something their families and other students fear. Students who are involved with extra-curricular

activities or are clearly focused on a goal and supported in that by their parents seem to avoid such dangerous entanglements.

Many students from Three Mountains do not get involved in sports, drama, or music at the High School, and people in the community worry that these students will get involved in other activities. Fifth generation resident, Mr.

R states:

Part of it was the different group there - the Big Harbor element I think more or less changed a lot of boys there....Lots of dope showed up, a lot of things like that they didn't have before, and Big Harbor has had its inroads, people moving in, and they bring a lot of the stuff with them.

And two younger people, a brother and sister add:

Brad: And we also lost the ones from Three Mountains. I knew all of them and had them all in the same class from K through Eighth grade except a few who came in later.

B: So you 'lost' them?

Brad: The ones who stayed in sports you stayed with for the most part.

B: I wonder if some of the kids who got lost get really lost?

Brad: There are bad influences as soon as you step across at least from Three Mountains at the High School. I can't speak for the other students, but I know what they were at Three Mountains.

Tina: They teach the others trouble...

Brad: They get in trouble with the teachers here but they weren't *trouble*. When you get in to the High School it went beyond the teachers and to what you did after school and it was *trouble*.

A current student and her mother discuss the impact of negative influences on students who are not involved in activities at the high school:

Mother: Our kids leave here sports being their whole thing. They get to high school, they don't get on a team, you look and see what they are doing instead, they are in drugs.

Daughter: Really, my class, oh my word.

Mother: We can give you examples of those kids.

Daughter: My best friend in Eighth grade she loves courses, she loves books, she loves just learning. My freshman year, the first day of school she got in with that crowd.

B: And this was mostly a crowd not from Three Mountains?

Daughter: They were Big Harbor kids plain and simple

Peer pressure and the desire for friends are very strong. Students who are not involved in extra-curricular activities and know few people at the High School can easily be drawn into inappropriate activities and friendships because students from other towns who are "on the fringe" are also looking for friends.

Residents of Three Mountains, though they are aware of drug traffic and use in the town, also believe that most of the students in the grammar school are well-insulated from involvement with drugs and other negative influences. Obviously, there are domestic and other problems within families, but for the most part, people from Three Mountains believe children in the town are "innocent" in comparison with students in the other island elementary schools. This leads to their concern that Three Mountains students will become involved with "negative" influences when they enter the High School.

Students, parents, and teachers identify another problem in the atmosphere of the High School that they feel is not conducive to good work: lack of discipline and respect. Many parents and teachers contrasted the behavior of students at Three Mountains and their respectful attitude towards parents, teachers, and other students with the less disciplined behavior of students at the High School. Many people felt this was a significant factor in the deterioration of student performance in high school.

Mrs. D., a Three Mountains School teacher, states, "Well I just think that maybe sometimes at the high school level there is less expectation as far as personal discipline. What is required is a laid back, lackadaisical atmosphere, whereas I think the kids' [behavior is] somewhat less than ... what we expect here. They are held accountable more here." Doug Gott, former School Board Member and long-time resident says, "They put up with too much foolishness at the high school. Another parent, adds, "discipline has broken down there." A former student responded to a question about work habits at the high school, "You don't care, there's not the same respect for the teachers, something happens." Another former student says, "I think the respect is gone [now], I still call my teachers Mr. or Mrs."

A girl currently at the High School notes "with lesser amounts of kids there is more control [at Three Mountains School]," and another student and her mother discuss the differences between the High School and Three Mountains School:

Mother: The other thing I have seen over the years that Three Mountains school has, and I don't think the High School has, is respect. We were always raised, there was a certain degree of respectfulness, whether you liked the teacher or not

Daughter: Definitely.

Mother: That's not in the High School anymore.

B: Do you think it is still part of the atmosphere what is expected at Three Mountains ?

Daughter: Oh definitely.

Lack of respect for adults shown by students from the other three towns towards their teachers is something, then, that bothers people from Three Mountains.

People in Three Mountains identify reasons behind the change, which they see reflected throughout society, not just in the High School. A student and her parents discuss these possible causes.

B: How do kids learn to be that way - respectful?

Father: A lot of it right now has to do with the home life, mothers stayed home, can't do it now, can't have a family and not have both spouses working,

Mother: We could do that with the first two kids, but there came a time you couldn't make it that way. I think there is a big thing, kids in their attitudes towards parents are definitely not the same.

Daughter: I think respect is time at home.

Mother: Parents don't have time to be bothered with these kids - why should the kids respect them ?

Daughter: It was never like that - it was always 'respect.'

Several people who graduated from the High School within the past ten years mentioned concern that the atmosphere at the school changed noticeably in a short period of time. Students, parents, and grammar school teachers link lower expectations for self-discipline, attitudes towards work at the high school, involvement with drugs, and diminished respect for adults with less involvement with extra-curricular activities. It is not within the scope of this dissertation to research the validity of this connection, but I think it is important to note that it was made independently by almost all interviewees and focus group members.

Guidance Counselors at the High School, as at most high schools, are responsible for more students than they can possibly know well. Two Guidance Counselors at Island High School work with 571 students and their families, overseeing placement in classes, guidance about post-secondary plans, as well as a myriad of other concerns. In addition, they meet with all Eighth grade students who will be entering as Freshmen to design their course of study. This is an impossible job, a legacy of James Conant's many unfortunate ideas for American High Schools. There is no way the two counselors at MDI High School can effectively deal with so many students, or provide the knowledgeable, caring guidance students from Three Mountains received from teachers at Three Mountains School. Three Mountains parents reflect on the marginal impact the Guidance Counselors had on post-secondary plans for their children:

B: What kind of guidance were they getting at the school. Did the guidance program help them...?

Jackie: You mean [states last name]? I don't know. Over at the High School ?

B: Yes.

Jackie: Oh, I don't know. They suggested, I think, they gave them pamphlets, I don't know, I don't know. {states full name}, isn't that his name? The only thing I know, they would have gone there for different brochures, because I know they applied for different schools.

B: And when your kids went to the High School, you and the kids had pretty much decided what they were going to do ?

Jackie: They decided what they were going to do.

Present and former students from Three Mountains believe they are disproportionately placed in lower track classes and have a hard time getting the programs they want.

Students currently at the high school explain:

Boy 1: Last year the Eighth Grade teacher had told us a lot about it, and the Guidance Counselors from here came down, but they seemed kind of reluctant to give us all high level courses, like I have all honors courses, but he said, "You are going for a tough schedule," but it is simple.

Boy 2: I didn't understand it when they was talking to me. I took six classes in the first semester when I didn't know...I had two study halls.

B: You would have liked to take more?

Boy 2: Yeah, get more credit.

The initial meeting at which students and the Guidance Counselors decide on the course of study, sometimes for the entire High School career, usually takes

no more than fifteen minutes. One Ninth Grader commented: "The main thing is that they make you decide what you want to do before you actually know; the Guidance Counselor says, 'What do you want to do when you are a Senior, what classes do you want to take?' Well, I don't know."

For some students, getting into demanding courses can be difficult. For others, getting approval for an easy schedule may be too easy. One parent, himself once a high school principal explains:

I think a lot of times, though - the kids who have signed up for courses - that the parents have no idea. The parents think they are taking certain courses, but they are taking something altogether different. I know [my son] did. He wanted to graduate in the Junior year, he had enough credits. I said, "You have plenty of time to work." He took seven periods of shop - all he did is horse around. That year was half through before I found out, and I was on the School Board.

A member of the first class to graduate from the consolidated high school shows us how the lack of guidance affected a very able student who was not getting support from her parents:

D: ...in the classroom everybody had equal opportunity to do whatever, if you had it. When I was a Freshman, I was mixed with all the kids from the island in honors classes. I said, "OK, this is like, for the first time the slate is level, I can do this." I was prepared ...in the classroom, and I went into honors math. I was two years in high honors. Then kind of like [one of my daughters], I wondered why am I working so hard, doing so well when I am going not anywhere? I switched from college to business [track] and played harder, so I ended up not going [to college].

B: When you decided to change your program what happened, you just decided on your own?

D: Oh yeah, I didn't ask anybody and I felt really good about it ... because I had taken charge of my own life, made my own decisions, even though it meant stepping back. It felt good. I felt, I can do this, I will do this my way.

B: Did any of the teachers talk to you about this, the Guidance Counselors?

D: No.

The structure of counseling at the high school, combined with decreasing parental involvement with the school and with students, creates a situation in which students who are vulnerable may get lost. Very able students who lack parental or family support are also vulnerable as they confront a future that looks as if it offers only limited options.

A current student shares her opinion:

You have to fight to get in to see the Guidance. The one thing I would change in that High School is the Guidance. That was the worst. I liked my Guidance Counselor [but] he is useless as a bump on a log...I like him as a person, but I am finding out things my Senior year that I should have found out years ago.

B: Did he ever talk to you about it ?

H: We talked about it, but like I said I wasn't very vocal.

This student, like too many others, reserved her feelings and never talked openly with her Guidance Counselor because he had so many other students to work with he couldn't take time to get to know her and help her feel comfortable.

Students feel that they are well prepared at Three Mountains School to do the academic work at the High School; in fact, some feel they are over-prepared

1

and that the work at the High School is undemanding and boring. One student put it this way: "We spent the entire eighth grade year preparing for High School. Then when we got here it was so simple." Another added that academically she felt "over-prepared," while a boy stated that his ninth grade year "has been kind of boring, very boring." However, the lack of equipment, particularly in Science, Art, computers, and Theater made it very difficult to compete with students from the other island schools that are better equipped.

H: You go from a small school over to the High School and it is like you don't have the experiences that they do and that makes it harder to keep up with the, I could not have told you what a socket wrench is a year ago, I am in a shop class now and it, in Big Harbor they taught these things in the school. I have no chance, I know nothing about them.... It is harder for you to want to do something you don't know anything about when they have a background.

Father: How do you expect a kid to compete with kids who have had it and kids who haven't had it and expect them to keep up with the rest of the class.

Daughter: But we don't have a shop and we don't have a lab...or a theater.

One student says:

We had something great, [we had] Mr. Sawyer [who] is a great teacher - no we had no lab, there wasn't even a sink, just a poster of Einstein and a monkey.

And another boy adds:

The teacher [at high school] says, "Go get the beaker." The what?

Another student sums it up as follows:

On paper this High School blows Three Mountains out of the water, but when you are actually here it is very simple [easy].

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Strong teaching , small size, one-on-one relationship between students and their teachers compensate, in part, for lack of facilities, but one result is an unforeseen problem.

Students see a gap between the way their teachers at Three Mountains School view the academic demands of the High School and the reality they encounter their Freshman year.

Girl: When I was in Eighth grade the teachers made it out like it was so scary, you are going to get lost.

Many students, talking at once: You are going to have so much homework. You got here and you were so scared, and it was nothing. So simple.... Nothing like they said. It is not what it made it out to be. Not at all.

Boy: I swear C. left a trail the first day. He was bugging out, it was unreal. You are afraid you are going to get beat up by every other person. It is still like that now, not many seniors like you, for not apparent reasons, just cause you are a freshmen.

Boy 2: I think we just came into school just a little more prepared than the other kids. We had been told this, so we were petrified. It was going to be a lot of homework, but we got here and there wasn't as much homework as they had told us and we said, 'Oh this isn't so bad.' See a lot [of students] from the other schools, the High School kids from the other towns, they hear you don't have to take many courses, you don't have to take the hard courses, they only heard that from their cranks at the High School, so when they got here they kind of had a big shock - 'Oh my god, why do I have so much homework?'

Girl: I don't think they should have said all that stuff to us because you are already insecure about going to a big new school or whatever and adding that on top, it was kind of overwhelming.

Boy: Your head just went into meltdown.

These students added that they got their information about the High School from the teachers, not from siblings or other students.

In their attempt to prepare students, teachers at Three Mountains may be over-emphasizing the rigors of the High school, particularly the academic demands. Students stated that the Three Mountains teachers "think it [high school] is much harder than what it is, when you are here it is actually very simple." This seems to unnecessarily intimidate students and may, not coincidentally, result in their placement in lower tracks and less challenging courses.

The qualitative data gives us a picture of the way students and their families and members of the Three Mountains community view the High School. This data is, in large part, confirmed by the quantitative data.

QUANTITATIVE DATA:

Comparing the responses of Eighth Grade students who attend Three Mountains Grammar School and Ninth Graders from Three Mountains who attend Island High School shows ways in which these students feel differently about their lives and schools. The sample is small; however, it does include most of the possible population. Not all the responses are consistent, and certainly the angst of adolescence may be blamed for some of the alienation Ninth Graders feel. However, we are comparing a population that is similar in

many respects: students from Three Mountains who are only six to twelve months apart in age, and for whom the significant differing variable is attending the grammar school or high school. (One interesting difference between the two groups is that a much higher percentage of the parents of the Eighth Graders went to college.)

There are significant differences in the ways in which Eighth and Ninth Graders respond to questions on the National Center for Student Aspirations survey. Students in the Eighth Grade at Three Mountains School show more commitment to achievement, greater enjoyment of their daily lives, and a higher level of inspiration and ambition than students who graduated from Three Mountains Grammar School only a year before and attend the Island Regional High School.³

TABLE ONE
Results of Aspirations Survey, Part Two
Comparison of 8th and 9th Grade Students from Three Mountains

ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION					
Percent of students who agree or strongly disagree.				8th Grade	9th Grade
I like to be very good at what I do.				94.7	100.0
I feel I can do just about anything I want to if I put my				94.4	92.3
mind to					
it.					
I never make plans or set goals for myself.				11.8	23.1
Getting good grades is not important to me.				15.8	38.5
I can be very disciplined and push myself.				94.7	75

³ Survey results are reported in the Appendix.

ENJOYMENT of LIFE						
Percent of students who agree or strongly disagree.				8th Grade	9th Grade	
I usually feel tired and bored.				22.2	69.2	
I often have trouble getting motivated to do things.				31.6	53.8	
I don't seem to succeed no matter what I do.				11.1	30.8	
I am not interested in very many things.				5.3	23.1	
I am often in a good mood.				94.7	69.2	
INSPIRATION						
Percent of students who agree or strongly disagree.				8th Grade	9th Grade	
Most of the things I do in school I find enjoyable.				81	61.5	
School causes a great deal of stress for me.				42.9	84.6	
When I'm at school, time seems to fly by.				66.7	69.2	
School is important to my life on a regular basis.				95.2	69.2	
I find it hard to concentrate in classes.				23.8	61.5	
I find excitement in almost every class I attend.				42.9	46.2	
AMBITIONS						
Percent of students who agree or strongly disagree.				8th Grade	9th Grade	
What I learn in school will benefit my future.				90.5	84.6	
I give little thought to my future.				4.8	38.5	
I am looking forward to a successful career.				100.0	92.3	
I have high goals and expectations for myself.				95	84.6	
I don't expect very much of myself in the future.				0	23.1	
Most things I learn in school are important to my future.				90.5	92.3	
ACHIEVEMENT						

Overall, when I think about my classes...				8th Grade	9th Grade
I stop trying when I don't understand some things				20	23.1
I believe I can always improve/	improve.			95.2	100
In general, my teachers...					
tell me to keep trying when I struggle.				100	84.6
like it when I try my best even when I get a wrong answer.				100	69.2
tell me I'm doing a good job when I try my best.				94.7	76.9
let me know it is important to be successful in school.				100	66.7
don't	check	home	work	0	38.5
BELONGING					
Overall, when I think about my classes				8th Grade	9th Grade
I never have the opportunity to work with others.				10	38.5
my thoughts are accepted.				94.4	84.6
In general, my teachers	...				
encourage me to help others in class.				78.9	76.9
accept that different students have different opinions				100.0	69.2
value my opinions.				83.3	69.2
do not value different opinions.				22.2	8.3
CURIOSITY					
Overall, when I think about my classes...				8th Grade	9th Grade
I learn about things I did not know before.				90.5	84.6
I explore problems.				80	76.9
I seek solutions to complex problems.				90	69.2

In general, my teachers...				
want students to be interested in learning.			100.0	92.3
make me uncomfortable when I ask for help.			11.1	30.8
encourage me to learn new things.			95	83.3
discourage me from learning new things.			5.3	30.8
EMPOWERMENT				
Overall, when I think about my classes...			8th Grade	9th Grade
I am not allowed to express my thoughts.			19	38.5
In general, my teachers...				
allow me to make choices about what I learn.			89.5	53.8
ask for my opinions/ideas.			72.2	83.3
treat boys and girls the same.			55	66.7
make it difficult for me to "be myself."			36.8	33.3
EXCITEMENT				
Overall, when I think about my classes.			8th Grade	9th Grade
I leave with a feeling of accomplishment.			85.7	69.2
I am usually bored.			42.9	53.8
I learn about things in the real world.			81	61.5
I never have fun.			5.3	30.8
In general, my teachers...				
make class exciting.			66.7	58.3
MENTORING				
Overall, when I think about my classes.			8th Grade	9th Grade
no one encourages me.			23.8	41.7
classmates never talk to me about what I am doing.			15	38.5

In general, my teachers...						
care about my success in class.				95	92.3	
serve as role models to me.				63.2	41.7	
expect me to succeed and help me to do so.				77.8	92.3	
care about my problems and feelings.				78.9	69.2	
RISK-TAKING						
Overall, when I think about my classes...				8th Grade	9th Grade	
I feel comfortable asking questions.				80	84.6	
I feel comfortable going to another student for help.				95.2	83.3	
In general, my teachers...						
do not allow me to explore as much as I want to.				15	30.8	
encourage me to find answers on my own.				100.0	84.6	
support me when I take chances in the classroom.				71.4	61.5	
are too critical and insensitive to others.				5.3	30.8	
SELF-CONFIDENCE						
Overall, when I think about my classes...				8th Grade	9th Grade	
I am confident in my ability to do well.				90	75	
I find it enjoyable regardless of what others may think.				60	38.5	
I dislike almost everything I do.				23.8	30.8	
I have a generally positive attitude regarding learning.				100.0	83.3	
I set high goals and expectations for myself.				90.5	69.5	
In general, my teachers...						
make me feel shy or uncomfortable around them.				10.5	23.1	
think I am a poor student.				5.3	23.1	

For example, the percentage of students in Ninth Grade responding that they do not make plans or set goals, or that getting good grades is not important to them, is twice that of Eighth Graders. Ninth Graders are much more likely to feel tired and bored, to have trouble getting motivated, to be disinterested in things around them, and are less frequently in a good mood than Eighth Grade students. The percentage of Ninth Graders reporting that school causes them stress is twice that of Eighth Graders. Almost a quarter of Ninth Graders state that they don't expect much of themselves in the future, while no Eighth Graders express such low expectations.

It is easy to undercut the importance of these discrepancies by attributing them to the tribulations of adolescence. However, that argument must be measured against the fact that Ninth Graders say they *feel* much worse than do students who are from very similar backgrounds, and whose only difference is that they are not yet at the high school. Surely, how students feel about their lives and about their school has value. If Ninth Graders from Three Mountains feel so much worse than Eighth graders, then something in their lives is not going well. The most significant variable, besides possible onset of puberty, that differentiates these students is that they are in different schools.⁴

Using the summary data prepared by the NCSA we can compare some responses of Three Mountains Students against a sample of Seniors from

⁴ Principal Perkins states that the two groups of students are roughly similar in age and sex distribution, and both were considered to be "good" classes.

Maine, against a sample of high school students in Maine and another sample of high school students throughout the United States.

TABLE TWO

Comparison of Three Mountains Students with State and National Data

ACHIEVEMENT								
MOTIVATION								
Percent of students who agree or strongly disagree.				8th Grade	9th Grade	ME Srs	ME H.S.	U.S.
I never make plans or set goals for myself.				11.8	23.1	28	22	27
ENJOYMENT of								
LIFE								
Percent of students who agree or strongly disagree.				8th Grade	9th Grade	ME Srs	ME H.S.	U.S.
I usually feel tired and bored.				22.2	69.2	42	47	39
INSPIRATION								
Percent of students who agree or strongly disagree.				8th Grade	9th Grade	ME Srs	ME H.S.	U.S.
Most of the things I do in school I find enjoyable.				81	61.5	60	52	53
I find excitement in almost every class I attend.				42.9	46.2	36	26	27
AMBITIONS								
Percent of students who agree or strongly disagree.				8th Grade	9th Grade	ME Srs	ME H.S.	U.S.
What I learn in school will benefit my future.				90.5	84.6	88	90	89
I give little thought to my future.				4.8	38.5	76	77	73
I am looking forward to a successful career.				100	92.3	97	95	96
I have high goals and expectations for myself.				95	84.6	92	85	85
I don't expect very much of myself in the				0	23.1	78	89	78

future.								
Most things I learn in school are important to my future.				90.5	92.3	88	90	89
ACHIEVEMENT								
Overall, when I think about my classes...				8th Grade	9th Grade	ME Srs	ME H.S.	U.S.
I believe I can always improve.				95.2	100	95	91	92
BELONGING								
In general, my teachers								
value my opinions.				83.3	69.2	73	67	63
EMPOWERMENT								
In general, my teachers...								
make it difficult for me to "be myself."				36.8	33.3	59	64	57
EXCITEMENT								
Overall, when I think about my classes.				8th Grade	9th Grade	ME Srs	ME H.S.	U.S.
I leave with a feeling of accomplishment.				85.7	69.2	73	61	59
I am usually bored.				42.9	53.8	42	47	39
In general, my teachers...								
make class exciting.				66.7	58.3	55	50	48
MENTORING								
In general, my teachers...								
care about my success in class.				95	92.3	81	79	79
serve as role models to me.				63.2	41.7	52	43	41
expect me to succeed and help me to do so.				77.8	92.3	81	79	79
care about my problems and feelings.				78.9	69.2	65	64	59

It seems important that the responses of Three Mountains Eighth Graders is more positive in answer to almost every question than the responses of the other students who were surveyed.

The Aspirations Survey looks for the degree to which a school satisfies preconditions the NCSA has identified as important for high aspirations. Comparing the responses of Eighth and Ninth Graders shows that Three Mountains School does a better job than the high school in providing the setting in which students can develop high aspirations. The survey results also confirm informants' observations that fewer teachers at the high school check homework for accuracy or completion.

Students in Eighth Grade are more highly oriented to achieve, report greater feelings of belonging, feel more curious, more fully supported by their teachers, and slightly more empowered than Ninth Graders from Three Mountains. Three Mountains Eighth Graders feel excited by class, and only 5.3 percent say they never have fun, in contrast to 30.8 percent of Ninth Graders. Almost twice as high a percentage of Ninth Graders say no one encourages them. 63 percent of Eighth Graders report that teachers serve as mentors, while only 41.7 percent of Ninth Graders agree with that statement. Again, more Three Mountains Eighth Graders feel encouraged to take risks than Ninth Graders at the high school from Three Mountains. The scores concerning Self-Confidence seem particularly noteworthy: they indicate Eighth Graders from Three Mountains are much more self-confident than

SUMMARY:

Important differences characterize Three Mountains Grammar School and Island Regional High School. These differences coupled with exposure to some negative influences, make transition to the high school difficult for some students from Three Mountains. The high school does not offer the nurturing, supportive base for students that they received at Three Mountains School. As they make their transition, Three Mountains students move from the influence of teachers they have known for many years, and who know them, to a new peer group. They can get discouraged by the lack of adult support and the difficulties of maintaining aspirations for post-secondary education. If they are in a peer group that eschews the value of higher education, or their parents don't understand why they should go on in school, they are more vulnerable. Many are simply unable to sustain the goals they may have had in grammar school and cannot go against the values of the culture that tells them post-secondary education is unattainable and not worth their investment of time and money.

In their transition to Island Regional High School, many students from Three Mountains enter a larger and different world. Many of them do well academically, socially, and in extra-curricular activities because they have been well prepared at Three Mountains School and have supportive parents. However, for those who are less confident, less sophisticated, or less assertive, the transition is difficult and goals to which they may have aspired begin to seem

impossible to achieve. Just at the time they make this transition, the support Three Mountains students have enjoyed from parents, teachers, coaches and their community begins to disappear. It is as if having been nurtured on very rich milk, they are weaned so suddenly that some find it difficult to thrive. It is in the critical years of high school that some students find it too hard to hold onto the goal of continuing their education after graduation. For these students what they perceive as the realities of adulthood in Three Mountains begin to cloud over dreams of childhood and they settle for a way of life that is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain without an income based on professional skills.

Bibliography and/or full text available on request.
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